Charles Forsdick & Christian Høgsbjerg, *Toussaint Louverture: A Black Jacobin in the Age of Revolutions*. London: Pluto Press, 2017. xii + 179 pp. (Paper US\$ 20.00)

To the question “Will there ever be a truly authoritative biography of Toussaint Louverture?” Charles Forsdick (a professor of French) and Christian Høgsbjerg (whose writings focus on black Marxist thinkers) reply that “the answer is probably no” (p. 6). It is an odd way to start a biography of Louverture, but the statement surely applies to this book, which is undermined by its ideological bias and its overreliance on other authors. (Both the question and the answer are borrowed from an article by David A. Bell in *The Nation*, November 2, 2016.)

Historians normally comb archives and then follow the sources wherever they may take them. Forsdick and Høgsbjerg proceed the other way around, beginning with a wish “to reassert the incendiary political implication of [Louverture’s] life, actions, and revolutionary political thought” (p. 10). Their model is *The Black Jacobins* (1938), the classic biography of Louverture by C.L.R. James. They lament what Chris Bayly has called the “conservative turn” in the scholarship on Louverture that has taken place in the past several decades as historians have uncovered less heroic aspects of his career (p. 7). And they cite Friedrich Engels: “Have these gentlemen ever seen a revolution?” (p. 143).

Key archival discoveries explain this shift in the historiography, which may shift again as new documents emerge and force us to reevaluate Louverture’s life once more. Alas, Forsdick and Høgsbjerg introduce no new material; almost all the footnotes point to English-language secondary sources. Even when they mention foundational accounts of the Haitian Revolution that are accessible in print, such as Gros’s *Historick Recital*, Louverture’s *Mémoire*, and Beaubrun Ardouin’s *Études*, they rely on secondary sources for their citations (see, for example, p. 38 note 26, p. 119 note 30, p. 133 note 16).

According to classic communist dogma, revolutions are the product of a society’s inner contradictions, so Marxist historians writing biographies of “Great Men” risk succumbing to what Thomas Carlyle has dubbed “Hero-Worship.” Louverture’s contradictory record further complicates the task of Forsdick and Høgsbjerg, who solve this conundrum by describing him alternatively as a “Precursor” who achieved all that could be achieved within the context of his time (p. 148) or as a flawed figure who never embraced the radical agenda of his successor Jean-Jacques Dessalines—this “one-sided genius” (p. 125), as James put it.

Louverture’s prerevolutionary life, which lasted almost 50 years, is covered in 17 pages in the first chapter. It was a particularly puzzling period during which he endured racism as a slave but also purchased and rented slaves as a freed-

man. “Elements of Toussaint’s early life lend themselves to a more conservative interpretation” (p. 24), the authors concede before moving on to his role in the 1791 slave revolt in Chapter 2. His record during the early Revolution was equally ambiguous but Forsdick and Høgsbjerg insist that he and other rebels were committed to universal emancipation from the outset, citing as evidence a speech by Boukman Dutty of dubious provenance and a December 1791 proposal in which Louverture actually suggested returning slaves to the fields.

In 1793–98, Louverture finally embraced emancipation and joined the army of the French Revolution. This idealistic phase, covered in Chapter 3, best fits the authors’ “black Jacobin” thesis, but they take it a step too far: they argue that his 1794 “volte-face” from the Spanish to the French army (as David Geggus has put it) was an idealistic act motivated by France’s recent embrace of emancipation, when Geggus’s careful research actually concluded that it was impossible to pinpoint the motives behind Louverture’s switch to the French army.

Chapter 4 focuses on the period 1798–1801, when Louverture undermined a slave revolt in Jamaica, implemented a restrictive labor code, and passed an authoritarian constitution. To explain such contradictions, the authors describe him (following James) as a “black Robespierre” who simultaneously unleashed the revolutionary potential of the masses and refused to embrace the agenda of his left wing.

Chapter 5 deals with the way Louverture’s equivocations came back to haunt him in 1802–3, when Napoléon Bonaparte sent an expedition to Haiti and the black population failed to support Louverture. His death in exile is discussed on page 123, leaving ample space for reflections on Louverture’s legacy, arguably the most interesting part of the book. Taking specific aim at Geggus, who has questioned the Haitian Revolution’s actual impact, Forsdick and Høgsbjerg insist that Louverture’s historical import was undeniable, and end (p. 150) by quoting William Wordsworth, “There’s not a breathing of the common wind / That will forget thee.”

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